How three numbers on every price tag could solve some really big problems

It's a simple idea. Doable, too. I'll explain it in a moment.

But first: which "really big problems" could it solve? Climate change? Environmental pollution? Poverty? Extreme social inequality? Unhealthy nutrition? Obesity?
All of them. Not entirely, though. Sorry. If we say "significantly reduce" instead of (completely) "solve", our expectations are more realistic.

So what's the idea?

Currently, every time you buy something, you pay a price. A *single* price. A box of cookies: 5 €, a flight ticket: 100 €. Whatever currency you use, each price is the sum of economic factors (costs, profits) and political factors (various taxes). "Various taxes" could be VAT, environmental tax, tobacco tax, sugar tax, import tax or luxury tax, to name a few.
Before electronic payment systems were invented, merging all these amounts into a single price was the only practical way to do business.

This is not necessary anymore. With electronic payment systems, charging three different accounts is just as easy as charging a single one. There are good reasons to do just that:

Imagine yourself in front of a supermarket cookie shelf. One box with locally made cookies is priced "5 € / 2 pc / 2 hc", where pc means "pollution credits" and hc means "health credits". On another box of the same size, the price tag says "3 € / 6 pc / 4 hc". These cookies were imported from a low-cost country, which explains their lower € price. However, they were transported thousands of kilometers, which explains their higher pc price. They also contain much more salt and sugar than the cookies in the first box, and that explains their higher hc price. You choose a box and pay, as usual, with your card or smartphone, and the prices are deducted from your €, pc and hc accounts. More about these accounts in a moment.

But first, let's look at a few more price tag examples:

A flight ticket: 100 € / 300 pc / 0 hc.
A train ticket for the same distance: 80 € / 20 pc / 0 hc.
Fossil fuel for driving a car the same distance: 120 € / 600 pc / 0 hc.
A bunch of carrots: 2 € / 2 pc / 0 hc.
A pack of cigarettes: 4 € / 6 pc / 70 hc.

(These numbers were made up for illustrative purposes.)

Note that replacing environmental and tobacco taxes with pc/hc pricing leads to lower € prices for flight tickets, fossil fuel and cigarettes.

Now, about your pc (pollution credits) account:
it automatically receives a deposit every day. Let's say 50 pc per day, or 75 if you take care of a young child. These amounts are the same for every adult citizen.

If you add up all pc's assigned to the country's population, institutions and companies over a year, you look at an approximation of the country's intended (or considered as acceptable) annual pollution. That's a politically determined figure.

Back to your personal pc account.
Its balance cannot become negative. If you have 200 pc left, you cannot buy something that costs 210 pc. You'll have to wait a day (+50 pc), or buy pc's for €'s at the central quota exchange center. In contrast, if you cause below-average pollution through your consumption habits, you can trade in your saved pc's at the exchange center and receive €'s back.

Does that mean that Mr. Richman cannot consume and pollute as he's used to? At least not without paying, via the exchange center, some of his €'s to (cliche alert) poor single moms, art students or pensioners? Who have pc's to spare because they consume and pollute far less? Yes, absolutely.

Thus, pc pricing is a tool that can reduce both pollution and poverty.
It sets much clearer incentives than hidden taxes do, and, unlike taxes, it offers actual rewards.

In case it isn't clear already: every time you buy something, you cause pollution. Whatever you buy, be it product or service: it requires raw materials, and/or manufacturing, and/or energy production, and/or packaging, and/or transport (probably all of it). None of this is pollution-free. Even if you buy second-hand, your purchase is not completely pollution-free (think transport, cleaning, refurbishing).

Now let's take a look at your hc (health credits) account.
Also this account receives a deposit every day, say 10 hc per day, equivalent to slightly more than what an average day's portion of healthy food costs you. If you take care of a young child, you get more. Your account balance cannot exceed an upper limit, say 300 hc, to prevent people from chasing records, for instance by eating too little. Non-food items are usually priced "0 hc". Tobacco is among the exceptions.

Unlike pc's, hc's cannot be bought or sold, and your personal hc balance can be positive or negative. This balance mainly indicates whether you've been buying approximately the recommended amount of healthy food, in which case it would slowly climb to its upper limit and stay near it.
Note that "indicates" does not mean "shows with certainty", and "buy" does not mean "consume yourself".

Nevertheless, a very negative hc balance tells you clearly that you're buying unhealthy products or that you're buying too much. If you often buy food for other adults, consider asking them to pay for your food sometimes, to even out your hc costs. Alternatively, buy only healthy "0 hc"-priced food for them.

It's a political question whether a very negative hc balance should trigger any countermeasures, and if so, which ones. Medical counseling? Higher health insurance rates? Should shops be prevented from selling unhealthy products to customers while their hc balance is very negative? Something else? None of this?

These are not the only open questions in this concept. I can think of many more, but I can also think of possible answers. (And, probably, so can you who have read this far.) But I promised no more than to explain the idea, and I think I've done that.

Conclusion:
Adding more dimensions to traditional prices has very probably greater advantages than disadvantages. Because these advantages include less pollution, less poverty and healthier nutrition, this "3D pricing" concept should be worth consideration, testing, refinement and implementation. There is so much to gain.

Note that man-made climate change is a consequence of atmospheric pollution (with CO2 and other substances).
Also note that prices, daily deposits (quotas) and the €/pc exchange rate need to be adjusted over time to achieve the desired results.

Outlook:
Unfortunately, if getting any attention at all, this concept would meet opposition by powerful (rich) lobby groups. Also politicians and bureaucrats with a "let's not change anything important before 2050" attitude would resist it. And these groups usually get what they want. However, the much larger rest of the population has power, too. We'll see.

Edgar Hartel, 2025